Reflections on a career: Glimpsing the future?

by John Reynolds

I REMEMBER MY EXCITEMENT AS I DEVOURED page after page of Dick Sellars' fabulous 1997 book, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*. Although over 50 and with more than 35 years invested in my career with the National Park Service, I was gripped with a clear understanding of the thoughts that had been trying to find meaning as they caromed around and evolved in my brain. I realized that Dick's historical recounting of the National Park Service's decades-long neglect of natural resource preservation validated the conclusions that my life in the national parks and the National Park Service had led me to.

I have heard this evolution of thought called a "deathbed conversion," but I don't think this is either true or fair to those thoughtful individuals to whom the appellation is often attached. Why? Because they, like me, arrived at these conclusions through deep introspection about the mission of the Service in relation to an ever-changing society and its effects upon the national landscape.

It all started for me in 1942. I was born late that year, the son of a new Yellowstone park ranger. Educated as a forester, he and my mother had been teachers before coming to Yellowstone and the Service they grew to love. Son and daughter of eastern Oregon ranchers gone broke in the depression and veterans of several summers on Forest Service lookouts, they flourished outdoors. As a forester, educator, and outdoorsman, my dad (and I) arrived when, as *Preserving Nature* makes clear, the philosophy of the National Park Service was dominated indelibly by the leadership and thinking of foresters, park rangers, and landscape architects. Dad was the first two; I was to become the latter.

A little over a decade later the most influential national program in the history of the National Park Service was born: Mission 66. Dedicated to making the fit between visitors and the parks more comfortable and the experience more informed and inspirational, it changed the face of the parks that most visitors saw. It stamped the National Park Service as a bureau dedicated to visitor enjoyment above all else. It welcomed the touring masses. It recognized forthrightly the power inherent in the idea that visitors who enjoyed the parks were the best constituents the Service could ever have.

Near the end of this euphoric era I became a landscape architect. I joined at the end of Mission 66 and the beginning of an era of unprecedented park expansion. It was a heady time!

Thirty or so years later, Sellars' book struck a nerve that ran deep into the soul of an evolving National Park Service. George Wright had been dead for some 60 years and the 1963 Leopold Report was more than 30 years old. Suddenly, within two years, the second great influential national program with the power to change the core of the bureau was born: the Natural Resource Challenge. Oddly, perhaps, its germination was not from the minds of "young rebels;" instead, it was from men and women in the twilight of their careers. These were dedicated careerists who had fought the wars of the National Park Service for a long time, who had thought deeply about its mission, and who had observed carefully what was happening to American society and the landscape. A deathbed conversion it was not. A last contribution in careers of nearly all-encompassing caring is more truthful.

The Challenge so born was informed and grew to its robust final design with the involvement of folks newer to the Service who understood the new "guts" of managing natural resources. Presented expertly, honestly, and with professional fervor, it grabbed the attention of two administrations and the Congress. Though not finished yet, in either its funding or its implementation, it is already having an indelible effect on how the National Park Service conducts its business. It has begun to bring long-needed balance to carrying out the core legislated mission of the National Park Service to the biological and physical (as well as cultural) resources of the parks. As importantly, it is helping to ensure that future visitors will get the authentic experiences that the framers of the Organic Act envisioned for them.

It is no secret that I am proud to have been deeply involved over the last four years of my career in making the Challenge a reality. What is somewhat more of a secret is how it made me think more deeply about the future. And so, finally, to the point of this little essay, and a return to my youth.

It is easy today to say that my dad and his peers were wrong. It is even easier to say that the architects (specifically the landscape architects, for they were the ones who held the power) of Mission 66 were wrong. It is easy … and wrong.

They did their jobs based on what they knew, and in remarkable response to the pressures of our society then. The "natural" parks were very remote in 1955. You had to want to get to them. They were destinations. They were assumed to be healthy. After all, they were national parks, the most protected natural places in the world! And to be saved forever, they needed a popularly based constituency. Mission 66 gave that to the parks, and its effects, arguably, are still the basis for popular support of the National Park Service today, some 50 years later.

"Sellars' book struck a nerve that ran deep into the soul of an evolving National Park Service."

Park Ranger Harvey Reynolds enjoys a moment in 1943 with his young son, John, in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming.

As Sellars pointed out, however, that is not all of the story. The history that he traces is true. But the untold story is the future. What does it hold, and more importantly, how does the National Park Service position itself to deal with it?

First, we need to assess the present, a time and more critically a condition, when the parks are no longer remote from either visitors, industry, or the by-products of burgeoning population. Access is relatively easy today, but in the days when our mores as staff of the National Park Service were being established, the effects of civilization seemed benign. More people clamor to be refreshed and inspired by visiting parks than ever before. Biological integrity is not ensured, even in the short term. The aesthetically driven way we dealt with preservation issues in the past is no longer sufficient in response to the Organic Act. We know more, and what we know changes what must be done. The problem, though, is that the expectation of the majority of citizens and their political representatives is still deeply rooted in Mission 66 mentality.

The basic values for the existence of national parks have evolved from being just beautiful nature reserves and vacation destinations to enjoy and be inspired by to being cherished additionally as bastions of biological, physical wilderness and places of historical authenticity and integrity. At the same time, expectations for "visitor enjoyment" have evolved from people who visit primarily as leisure-time vacationers to virtual visitors, such as those who enjoy national parks as bases for heritage education. This includes partners in conservation service and participants in school programs through college and beyond. The needs of our citizens have changed and expanded, and with them opportunities to serve.

If this is the present forecasting the future, how does the National Park Service get there? First, the National Park Service must lead its own way into the future. Every employee—career, political, or temporary—must take responsibility for shaping the future. Second, both the career and political leadership have the responsibility to unstintingly represent the Organic Act and use it as their personal philosophical and ethical guide to decision making. Third, from top to bottom, they must connect the public to the parks for the benefit and enjoyment of the people. And finally, they must retain and grow the confidence of the public for the parks.

To do so will require that the National Park Service:

1. Complete and institutionalize the Natural Resource Challenge.
2. Embrace and practice conservation biology both in the parks and with conservation partners, with whom the parks share animals and ecosystems that extend beyond park boundaries.
3. Staff parks and other offices with highly qualified science and resource management professionals.
4. Fully implement the Message Project—an analysis of marketing and graphic identity strategies for application in NPS communications—and provide superb information, interpretation, and in-park experiences.
5. Offer the parks as authentic bases for educational opportunities through partners, schools, and off-site media.
6. Know more about the natural history of the parks than anyone else, both in quantity and content, and embrace all-taxa inventories.
7. Learn to partner as often as possible with other agencies and nongovernmental organizations with complementary programs to preserve park resources and create constituents for the future.
8. Retain the heritage of aesthetic excellence for which the parks are known.

These actions can form the base of a future as wonderful as the past has been, but a future that has evolved to meet tomorrow's demands and opportunities. If that happens, the legacy of Dick Sellars and the "deathbed conversions" will serve the nation as well as the first 87 years of the National Park Service's history has. ■